Negotiating National Boundaries in recent British Children's Cinema and Television

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Abstract

In his study of British children's cinema, Noel Brown suggests its distinctive character has been challenged by the globalisation of media culture, arguing that productions with a strong reference to national contexts are under pressure to homogenise their content to please a wider demographic. This chapter examines the British animation studio, Aardman, whose output, and particularly its films featuring Wallace and Gromit, make extensive use of national cultural references. This has provided varying success internationally with some releases, especially those made with American backing, being criticised for sacrificing distinctiveness for commercial ends. How viable is it for children's cinema and television to maintain a connection with the national culture from which it emanates? And what is lost, or gained, in the attempt to appeal to children across national boundaries?

Short Biography

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Introduction

When considering the often heated debates regarding the nature of national identities, a common starting point is Benedict Anderson's landmark study *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism* (2006). Anderson is best remembered for his concept of nations as states 'imagined' by their own citizens, where feelings of belonging are engendered not so much by governments or outlines on maps but more by loosely defined sentiments rooted in history, culture and everyday practices (Anderson 2006). For Anderson, the imagined nation gradually came into being as two previously dominant forms of imagining identity, religion and dynasty, went into decline during the nineteenth century. As national identity rose to pre-eminence as a means of self-definition, forms of cultural communication were crucial to its influence and discourse. Initially this meant that it was printed material "which made it possible for rapidly growing numbers of people to think about themselves, and relate themselves to others" within a framework of national identities (Anderson 2006, 36). Seen within this context, something as seemingly liminal as children's cinema and television can also, therefore, play its part in both forming that sense of imagined national community and reflecting back how it has been constructed in the wider discourses. Anything created for children has the added potency brought about by its role in education and personal development, as well as through the feelings of nostalgia which it can evoke.

Noel Brown's comprehensive history of British children's cinema often touches on the way in which key films have reflected, elaborated on, or even subverted dominant notions of national identity in the UK. His detailed analysis of *The Railway Children* (1970), for example, examines how the film embodied a range of national characteristics, including a strong sense of historical period and the romantic use of landscapes, as well as family bonds and relationships, which tapped into national mythologies, such that it was an easy choice for

the first ever Royal Matinee Performance attended by various youthful members of the wider Royal Family (Brown 2016, 183). This potency was increased further by its appearance at a time of growing national economic and social crisis. Such narratives have become embedded in the national consciousness. However, Brown suggests that the success of British children's cinema, and by association television, has come under increasing pressure in the face of media globalisation in the last twenty years. Brown cites the cultural value of British children's cinema as lying precisely in its ability to reflect national concerns but sees this as coming under the influence of a "necessary commercial pragmatism" as the pressure of the "global family media marketplace" has necessitated the dilution of these qualities in the pursuit of an increasingly homogenised (and, by implication, Americanised) concept of success (Brown 2016, 263). The very qualities that give British children's cinema and television their value are, therefore, endangered by the dissolution of national cultural boundaries. This essay has been written in response to Brown's concerns and focuses on a case study of the production company Aardman Animations whose success has been bound-up with precisely these questions of national identity and globalisation.

The Context of British Children's Cinema and Television

Before looking at the debates around the impact of globalisation, and examining the example of Aardman, it's worth outlining briefly the historical context out of which the company developed. The area remains remarkably neglected in terms of academic scholarship. A brief online search reveals one major study of British children's cinema, the aforementioned *British Children's Cinema: From the Thief of Baghdad to Wallace and Gromit* by Noel Brown. By comparison there are a far greater number of books on British children's television but their focus remains resolutely on either children as an audience, the educational, social and psychological effects of television on children, or on questions of

policy and regulation, as seen in Davies and Kelley's *Children's Television in Britain: History, Discourse and Policy* (1999) or *Television, Childhood and the Home: A History of the Making of the Child Television Audience in Britain* by David Oswell (2002). Very little critical attention has been paid to the actual content of the films or programs themselves as creative texts, let alone their interaction with concepts of nationality.

Brown's study of British children's cinema begins with the silent era, moves across key genres such as the adventure film, charts the popularity of star performers like George Formby or Norman Wisdom, and covers the work of influential companies like Disney (who at various periods have focused on making films in the UK with specifically British cultural content aimed at children). It's useful to consider his analysis of a specific film to show how he delineates elements which evoke a notion of Britishness. Brown is especially fond of Bryan Forbes' *Whistle Down the Wind* (1961), a film not made solely for children but which depicts childhood and has retained a strong appeal to family audiences (Brown 2016, 132-36). Like *The Railway Children*, the film makes skilful use of its rural landscapes, there is an emphasis on realism in the depiction of everyday life, and children are seen as 'embodying innocence and virtue' (Brown 2016, 133). There is also a strong feeling for place, in this case the environs of Burnley in the industrial north west of England. Another important feature for Brown is the degree to which children, and children's cinema, can be the home of purposefully oppositional sentiments. Here it is the innocence of the children - mistaking an escaped convict (Alan Bates) for Jesus - which contrasts all the more starkly with the failures and cynicism of the adult world. These adults are 'joylessly self-preoccupied, they merely pay lip service to Christian precepts of love and forgiveness, and have little understanding of transcendent concepts of beauty and lyricism" (Brown 2016, 133). These oppositional

qualities are seen by Brown as being a recurrent motif in the British children's cinema, where genuinely dark and challenging material is frequently dealt with.

Similar qualities are to be found in the work of the Children's Film Foundation (CFF), a unique body created in the UK, albeit imitated elsewhere afterwards. The CFF were founded in the early 1950s with the express intention of supporting a national network of Saturday morning children's film clubs by providing suitable entertainment. Their output covered educational shorts, travelogues, adventure serials, knockabout comedy, and the distinctive sixty-minute features which usually formed the second half of the Saturday morning programs. As well as providing entertainment, the CFF strived towards shaping the adult citizens of tomorrow with an emphasis on values seen as being characteristically British such as fair play, politeness, honesty, and a concern for others (Shail 2016, 8-16). In the 1960s it developed a taste for greater realism, with extensive use of location shooting (budget permitting) on the streets of London where the lives of working-class children were often depicted in an unpatronising way. Later in its history, under increasing financial pressures as its subsidy funding via government was cut, it went into partnership with its old enemy, television, to become the Children's Film and Television Foundation (CFTF). Its senior personnel were increasingly recruited from television, and particularly from the BBC Children's department, and brought with them another characteristic British quality which shaped its later output, a concern to be socially progressive. This can be found in a number of its films of the 1970s and 1980s such as *Terry on the Fence* (1985), a film remarkable for its "grittiness and honesty", as well as for a willingness to present "its young audience with moral quandaries" (Shail 2016, 94). Here the apparently aggressive and semi-criminal Les, is revealed to be a product of social neglect and parental abuse, his situation depicted with sympathy. The oppositional qualities noted by Noel Brown are much in evidence here too.

A major influence on this trend in British children's cinema after 1970 stemmed from the direction taken more widely by children's television, and especially the work of pioneering producers like Monica Sims and Anna Home at the BBC. Sims was Head of Children's Programs with the BBC for nearly twelve years (1967-78), a role later taken over by Home, overseeing "a near revolution in its output, discarding the cosiness of the 1950s for a much more contemporary and socially relevant approach" (Shail 2016, 37). Anna Home commissioned the ground-breaking series *Grange Hill* (1978-2008), probably the single most influential British children's program of its era. The series combined realism with an ability to reflect naturalistically the everyday concerns of its teenage audience. This included tackling controversial subjects such as a bullying or drug abuse in a moderately frank way (allowing for the age of its intended audience), consequently bringing down the wrath of British tabloid newspapers but securing a consistently large audience and high approval from many social policymakers. In her brief history of children's television, *Into the Box of Delights* (1993), Home argues that the distinctive nature of British television output for children is rooted in "the public service tradition which has dominated broadcasting from its beginning" (Home 1993, 9). Writing in 1993, she already takes a position similar to Noel Brown's view on British children's cinema, by seeing the impending advance of both globalisation, deregulation, and free market economics as a potential threat to the distinctiveness which gives home-grown media its particular value; she concludes her "Introduction" by wondering whether British children's television as she knows it will still exist by the turn of the new millennium or if it will "as in many countries, have been reduced to wall-to-wall cartoons and so-called 'family drama'" (Home 1993, 14). Both Sims and Home were subsequently to head the CFF and the CFTF; subsequently Home became a central figure in the campaign group the Children's Media Foundation (CMF).

The specific field of British animation, so often a staple of both cinema and television content made for children, has also shown distinctly national qualities. Despite a dearth of academic analysis of British animation, Brown devotes considerable coverage to individual works such as *Animal Farm* (1954), adapted from George Orwell's novel, and *When the Wind Blows* (1986). Characteristically these two films tackle extraordinarily dark material, with *Animal Farm* depicting the gradual betrayal of an idealistic revolution among the animals of an exploitative farm, and *When the Wind Blows* focusing on the horrors of nuclear annihilation. In particular, he offers a detailed analysis of *Watership Down* (1978), from Douglas Adams' novel, a film remarkable for both its elegiac, melancholy narrative and its willingness to use comparatively graphic scenes of violence for a children's animation. For Brown, the film's British qualities lie in precisely its contrary approach, challenging "the domineering, sentimentalised Disney image" (Brown 2016, 200). Similarly, Ralph Stephenson suggests that British animation has corresponded more strongly to the artistic ambitions and experimentation of European traditions than it has to the family-friendly work of American studios like Disney, arguing that it has had a "world-wide impact with its surreal humour" (Stephenson 1973, 81). His examples include the psychedelia of *Yellow Submarine* (1968) and the anarchic work on television of animators like Terry Gilliam (*Monty Python's Flying Circus*, 1969-74) and Bob Godfrey (*Roobarb*, 1974).

These traditions in children's cinema, television and animation clearly contribute to an imagined sense of nation and draw much of their success from this. The work of Aardman Animation has consciously taken its place within these traditions.

Globalisation and National Media Culture

Anxieties about the effects of globalisation, and the consequent triumph of commercial imperatives over a public service ethos, were articulated through the creation of the Children's Media Foundation (CMF) in 2011. Constructed out of the ashes of the CFTF, and building on the work of the campaign group Save Kids' TV (SKTV), the CMF was led by Anna Home and Greg Childs, the first a former BBC producer and the latter a leading consultant on children's media. Anna Home explains that the CMF was "created out of anxiety at the low priority currently given to children's media by state-funded bodies, and as a response to the ever increasing commercial pressures in the sector" (Shail 2016, 148). This agenda is also clearly rooted in a framework which sees national identity as crucial to the cultural value of children's media: "our children … should be able to see content which reflects their everyday lives and the culture of the country they live in." She goes on to identify US global giants as the prime reason for vigilance: "We are concerned about American-funded media steering the agenda for all media production for children in Britain. The lack of a strong indigenous infrastructure producing distinctively British work is very worrying" (Shail 2016, 150).

Home was thinking about media in general but clearly had television at the forefront of her thoughts, but this argument obviously mirrors Noel Brown's commentary on British children's cinema. Subsequently, the CMF embarked on a campaign to influence policymakers in relation to providing greater support for indigenous children's media, including establishing an All Party Parliamentary Group with over eighty members, as well as recruiting high-profile supporters such as the children's novelist Philip Pullman. Their intervention was central in the successful 2013 campaign to persuade the British Chancellor to introduce tax breaks for British-based animation companies making work for children's

television, including Aardman who had already indicated that they might move production away from the UK for financial reasons. This policy decision was followed in 2015 with a move to provide similar tax benefits for all British producers of any form of children's television program.

One fascinating aspect of the UK government's decision to introduce tax relief for British animators and children's television producers was that in order to qualify they needed to meet the specifications of a "cultural test" operated by the British Film Institute. The cultural test is a points based system and covers areas such as cultural content and cultural contribution, as well as cultural hubs and cultural practitioners. The highest number of points awarded is for cultural content.[1] Throughout the legislation there is an underlying discourse which values concepts of national identity as crucial to the importance of children's media culture. Whilst the CMF have also been clear to point out the benefits to a domestic media infrastructure, in relation to employment and inward investment, this cultural dimension seems to remain paramount. The CMF has produced an annual handbook which also frequently reflects this discourse; the 2015 edition has no less than seven essays which focus on public service broadcasting. In his introduction to the 2013 Yearbook, Greg Childs suggests that "there are dangers in allowing 'the market to provide'" as this may lead to either a homogeneous media landscape for children or the domination of media culture by American-based multinationals; he implies that there is little different between the two anyway. He furthers the argument to include the idea that children's media has a role in developing national cohesion, so that "kids who don't see themselves, hear their own voices and experience their own stories are likely to be disengaged as future citizens" (Childs 2013, 10). This is a considerable claim and reflects a sense in which children's film and television is seen as fostering national identity

and culture in the face of a characterless, globalised market. It is within this context that I will go to examine the work of Aardman.

Aardman in Context

Aardman Animations was founded in 1972 by Peter Lord and David Sproxton as a vehicle for their ambitions to make a feature-length animation. Both Lord and Sproxton were born in Bristol, England and had been friends for some years before setting-up the company as a low-budget operation after graduating from university. They began by producing short stop-motion clay animations, commonly known as Claymation, including for *Vision On* (1964-76), a program made for deaf children at the BBC's regional studios in Bristol. These often featured a tiny Plasticine character named Morph who provided comic interludes. Such was his popularity that he went on to feature in a number of BBC children's art programs, as well as in his own series. The simple slapstick humour was an obvious precursor for much of their later work. In the late 1970s they moved outside of children's television and began to experiment with synchronising documentary sound recordings with stop-motion animations. The resulting shorts featured in the BBC series *Animated Conversations* (1977-78) and they reused the technique in a number of later shorts and advertisements such as those for British Gas. Again, humour was to the fore, with the documentary voicetrack being contrasted with anthropomorphic animal characters apparently owning the voices. Other notable work from this early period includes pop promos such as the multi award-winning animation for Peter Gabriel's song "Sledgehammer" (1986). Their style was notable for its highly detailed sets, rich characterisation and broad humour.

By the 1980s they had begun to hire in additional staff, including Nick Park who joined them in 1985 from the National Film and Television School. By this time, they were making shorts

for Channel 4 as well as the BBC. A key point in their development was reached with two shorts made by Park in 1989: *Creature Comforts*, which used a documentary voicetrack and which won an Academy Award, and the BAFTA-winning *A Grand Day Out* (1989). *A Grand Day Out* had begun as a student animation at the National Film and Television School and introduced the characters Wallace and Gromit who would go on to appear in three more animated shorts and a feature film, achieving enormous international success and critical recognition. The success of Park's work took Aardman to an international audience with a style which remained strongly British in tone and content.

In 1997 Aardman went into partnership with the major American producer, DreamWorks to finance and distribute their first full-length feature, *Chicken Run* (2000) – the production of feature animation is a notoriously expensive and labour intensive process. The film's critical and commercial success led to the announcement of a $250 million deal to jointly create a further four feature animations. *Chicken Run* successfully incorporated many elements familiar to British audiences, particularly through its narrative which evoked World War Two heroics, but also included voice work from the major Hollywood star, Mel Gibson. Subsequently *Wallace and Gromit: The Curse of the Were-Rabbit* (2005) – another Academy Award winner - and the computer animation *Flushed Away* (2006) were released but the deal between the two companies was then terminated in January 2007 before all the anticipated projects had been realised. Newspaper coverage pointed to the disappointing financial performance of the last two films but there was also speculation over the apparent differences in approach of the two companies. A report in the *Daily Telegraph* in February 2007 contrasts the slow, four-year production techniques of this "quirky" British company with the "Hollywood business model" of DreamWorks, based on a much faster turnaround. However,

the *Telegraph*'s report also suggests that as a "cuddly British institution" Aardman were "culturally incompatible" with their brasher American partners (Robey 2007).

However, the need for major finance prompted Aardman to seek another American partner, this time Sony Pictures Entertainment, with whom they signed an initial three-year deal in 2007 which was renewed in 2010. The films produced through this partnership, which include the wilfully eccentric *The Pirates! In an Adventure with Scientists!* (2012), have faced similar challenges at the box office as with the DreamWorks deal. After the lapse of the second contract period, Aardman's subsequent film releases have been with the French company Studio Canal providing distribution, including their most recent *Early Man* (2018), which has a strongly British flavour and was supported in its development by the British Film Institute. Seemingly, partnerships with Hollywood majors remain problematic for the company.

The narrative of Aardman's production history is certainly one of considerable international success, both critical and commercial. At the same time, it is also symptomatic of the huge challenges facing any company wishing to produce feature-length animation. The need to collaborate with companies outside of the UK has seen Aardman partnering both American and European operators. They have also continued to diversify their output across television and advertising, as well as work for cinema release. Press coverage has frequently focused on the distinctively British nature of their work and the pressure they might be under to soften or dilute those qualities in order to gain financial support outside of the UK. The following analysis of one feature film and one television series will outline the specific qualities that define the Britishness of Aardman's work, and some of the challenges this can raise.

Case Studies

The Wrong Trousers (1993) is the second of the four Wallace and Gromit shorts produced by Aardman and directed by Nick Park. It was a major international success garnering an Academy Award as the best short animation. The film establishes its British cultural identity through two key elements, the first of which lies in the mise-en-scene. The sets were created by the company Cod Steaks who have worked regularly with Aardman, and along with props and costumes evoke a very specific visual backdrop which relies for its effect on their recognition by an audience aware of a number of British motifs. The film's opening titles appear against patterned wallpaper of a style popular in the UK throughout the early postwar period and there are three rocket-shaped ornaments on the wall, referencing *A Grand Day Out* but also suggesting the three ducks ornaments typical in many British homes in the same period. The parody is culturally highly specific and would provoke an immediate reaction from British audiences.

The first image following the titles is of Gromit sitting at the kitchen table with a pot of tea, a cup and saucer, and a toaster. Tea is a constant reference point throughout the film. Wallace is a middle-aged man dressed constantly in a green cardigan, shirt and tie, and braces, placing him as someone who probably grew up in the UK in the 1950s and before the pop revolution of the 1960s. Later we see him in bed wearing his stripped pyjama bottoms and string vest, the latter being a particularly archaic throwback. Nostalgia for an earlier, imagined second Elizabethan age of the 1950s is another recurring motif. He speaks with a clear northern accent; Wallace was voiced by Peter Sallis who was actually born and raised in London and had to mimic the accent, although it would have been immediately identifiable for British audiences who would have associated him with the long-running BBC sitcom *Last of the*

Summer Wine (1973-2010), set in the Yorkshire Dales. The accent is homely and reassuring, suggesting a down-to-earth honesty.

The house where Wallace and Gromit live is a Victorian, red brick semi-detached familiar in towns and cities across the UK. There are knickknacks everywhere and a gigantic marrow, presumably a prize-winner from Wallace's allotment, sits pride of place, in a wooden frame on the living room wall. There are sash windows and a bannister rail up the stairs, which Gromit inevitably slides down. The spare room has a Victorian brass bed with a chamber pot visible under it. Gromit's own room has wallpaper decorated with bones, a Dansette record player, alarm clock, tennis racket and a dartboard. The house has a small backyard with a yard-brush leaning on the wall, and the front garden has a neat lawn, tidy flowerbeds, and an ornamental birdbath shaped like a Greek statue. The detail of the interior is so carefully observed from any number of postwar British homes that it even shows that the original Victorian fireplace has been replaced by a 1970s-tiled frontage, something that later, younger generations went out of their way to remove. The design carefully suggests the most intimately recognisable details for the immediate postwar generation, or for younger British audiences the homes of their parents or grandparents. The sensation is warm, cosy and deeply reassuring. These details are reiterated by the exteriors scenes in the town with railway arches, higgledy-piggledy shopfronts, Victorian terraces, and 1960s tower blocks on the horizon. Even the museum is redolent of any number of city museums across the UK with their Georgian or Victorian facades, high-ceilinged rooms, polished wooden floors, and glass cases full of stuffed animals or dinosaur bones gathering dust. The local police station boasts a Victorian blue lamp hanging outside and the park has a children's play area complete with miniature roundabout and slide. Nostalgia for childhood pursuits is carefully raised here.

The second area of cultural reference lies in the dialogue and sound design. The opening titles play out against a musical theme with a brass band playing a jaunty melody, strongly evocative of northern mining communities. The piece becomes a kind of leitmotif for the characters. Wallace uses a range of colloquialisms designed to create immediate pleasure for a domestic audience, and presumably a form of exoticism for wider international audiences. He likes a three-minute egg for his breakfast and tells Gromit that the toast is "cracking." He calls Gromit "Chuck", a specifically northern epithet, and takes him for "walkies." With classic British dour understatement, he summarises the success of his newest invention with "Well, that went as well as could be expected." The splendid final chase sequence is peppered with his quirky utterances including "Mind how you go", "Steady on", "I'll give you what for, you tyke", "I'll get the bounder" and "This is a fine how do you do." The localism of the dialogue is supported by an array of warmly observed details of everyday British life, from the arrival of the mail through the letterbox to Gromit drinking tea and knitting, taking in the morning queue for the one bathroom and a finale where the villainous penguin is trapped inside a milk bottle. For those particularly in the know, the paper which Gromit reads is the Evening Post, a specific reference to the local newspaper in Bristol where Aardman's studios are still based. The accumulation of recognisable detail roots Aardman's work in the shared experiences of its domestic audience, offering the wider world a glimpse into a uniquely British idiom.

The level of cultural specificity used in *The Wrong Trousers* has become Aardman's calling card and is mirrored in their television work such as the popular series *Shaun the Sheep* (2007-). The series is more obviously tailored for television than the Wallace and Gromit short films, with a tight seven-minute running time, and is typically made in batches of around twenty to form a series. The format for each episode remains broadly the same. Set on

a rural farm, each simple story sees the inventive, intrepid Shaun leading his flock of fellow sheep as they attempt to help, or outwit, the Farmer and his rather cowardly dog, Bitzer. Again, there are a barrage of highly specific British references. The opening credits set the tone with a cockerel watching the sun rise over the farm and accidently spilling his mug of morning tea. The theme music is half a pub singalong and half an English folk tune. Bitzer wears a knitted beanie hat and carries his tea in a thermos with a tartan pattern. The farm and the surrounding countryside are fairly generic but the drystone walls, hedgerows, and fields full of sheep suggest the north of England or possibly Wales. The Farmer sports a green jacket and roll-neck jumper, with a wild comb-over and granny glasses. Narrative content also plays heavily on British stereotypes such as the weather; Episode Thirty-Four is entitled "If You Can't Stand the Heat" and takes place in a rare spell of sunny weather causing a battle between the Farmer, wearing the obligatory knotted handkerchief on his head, and the sheep over possession of an improvised swimming pool. The Farmer is easily fooled into thinking that the clouds have gathered, not noticing that it's a large sheep suspended over his head. One sheep is seen in the background knitting with curlers in her hair, while the Farmer returns after being ejected on board a red London double-decker bus.

Both *Shaun the Sheep* and *The Wrong Trousers* succeed in pushing beyond what might have been such an excess of localised references as to make them indecipherable for anything but a British audience. They do this firstly by the use of broad, visual slapstick likely to be recognised by any international audience. *Shaun the Sheep* in particular is a riot of sight gags with characters falling down, being run over by stray tractor tyres, or fired through the air by comic explosions, all to an array of exaggerated sound effects. The lack of dialogue deliberates suggests the style of classic silent comics like Charlie Chaplin. *The Wrong Trousers* relies more on nods towards known genre clichés, such as its caper narrative, noir

lighting, and sinister, melodramatic music, alongside neatly drawn characterisations; the friendship between the long-suffering Gromit and his amiable but foolhardy owner have an obvious universality. There is also a strong feeling for the underdog, which may qualify as both distinctly British and universal. Nonetheless, these elements are set aside an unashamedly inward looking aesthetic designed to rouse strong feelings of nostalgia and emotion in a British audience. These play on the pleasures of small everyday details such as tea drinking, keeping an allotment or flower garden, and complaining about the weather. There is a confidence among the creators that internationally the audience will know just enough of British life to recognise these motifs or will find them curious in their own right.

The challenges still faced by a company like Aardman, with an expanding global marketplace for children's media and the heavy cost of production, is evidenced by the curious reception given to *Flushed Away*. Released in 2006 as part of their partnership with DreamWorks, the film performed disappointingly at the box office and was credited by some commentators with bringing the production partnership to an end. Although lacking the handmade qualities of Aardman's stop-motion animations – the film was computer generated – the narrative and mise-en-scene are still full of their characteristically British tropes. The story concerns an upper-class rat, Roddy St James, who lives in a plush Kensington flat, and follows his adventures in the sewers beneath London in pursuit of a missing ruby. As well as references to the Royal Family and many good-natured jokes at the expense of the French, the story takes place against the backdrop of the football World Cup, even down to a final gag which reveals that England have lost in the final on penalties – a very British, or rather English, joke. Some critical responses in the US put the film's comparative commercial failure down to its British eccentricity: the reviewer for the *New York Post* wondered "how this thing got made in Hollywood is a mystery" (Smith 2007). In a contradictory manner, other American

reviewers sensed that the partnership with DreamWorks had in some way diluted the distinctiveness of Aardman's work; Richard Corliss in *Time* magazine speculated "I don't want to say the Englishmen were corrupted but I think they allowed their strongest, quirkiest instincts to be tethered" (Corliss 2006). The reviewer in British publication *Sight and Sound* asked whether *Flushed Away* was "Aardman's equivalent of Bob Dylan's electric guitar, the studio's 'Judas' moment?" (Osmond 2007, 59). Aardman seem caught here between the specificity of their Britishness, usually seen as one of their strengths, and the demand for global accessibility. It becomes almost impossible for them to win; on the one hand, they are too British for wide success, and on the other success seems to only be available at the cost of their distinctiveness. In terms of the quality of their output, there is obvious pressure on the very elements which brought their initial achievements.

Conclusion

The challenge of negotiating a global media marketplace while maintaining a distinctive national cultural identity is hardly unique to Aardman, or even British children's film and television. Many other examples exist which illustrate the tensions and opportunities that this context can bring. Japanese anime, with its highly distinctive visual aesthetic and narrative content, which draws on traditions from indigenous art such as the woodblock print and from comic books (manga), provides another comparison. Here films like *Akira* (1988) have shown how commercial success can be achieved internationally with challenging material, while *Spirited Away* (2001) received exceptionally positive reviews in many territories despite drawing on Japanese mythology and folklore which is markedly different from that known in most western traditions. Of course, this has often been achieved by dubbing over the original voicetrack, usually into English with major Hollywood stars employed. For devotees of anime the original Japanese release with subtitles is always preferable but is

unlikely to achieve the same level of release. For most anime films, however, international recognition is limited and the domestic audience remains paramount. The challenge for work aimed specifically at a young audience is often multiplied and animation has its own difficulties in terms of the high cost in time and money. Many European animation films for children are the result of multinational co-production partnerships which spread the risk and give wider access to subsidy. *The Secret of Kells* (2009) was a well-received, award-winning animated feature which originated in Ireland but IMDB lists no less than twenty-two production companies as being involved in its making, a number of which are drawing down public funds. Despite its positive reception, IMDB still reports that the film only played at thirty-seven screens in the whole of the US and achieved box office receipts of just $686,000, in comparison with an estimated budget of €6.5 million.[2] The very existence of the film may be due in part to its ability to reflect Celtic traditions important to the cultural heritage of a number of European countries.

Globalisation of children's media brings obvious opportunities for access to diverse markets and audiences, with the potential for consequent financial benefits. Aardman themselves have achieved international recognition and acclaim, as well as being able to accrue financial support for the very expensive business of funding animated features. At the same time this process can be fraught with difficulties, not least the problem of maintaining distinctive features which have fuelled initial success when faced with a tendency towards homogeneity which can often go along with global markets. Noel Brown points to both the case of Aardman and of the Harry Potter franchise, arguing that the latter may make extensive use of "English symbols" on a "superficial level" but that its vision of Britain is "largely unengaged with everyday realities behind the pleasing façade" (Brown 2017, 233-4). Commercial success has been at the price of distinctiveness, for Brown. For a company like Aardman,

they can find themselves shot down by both sides - being celebrated for their Britishness, while finding that these very same qualities become a liability when seeking financial backing from, often American-based, media conglomerates. Relying on national subsidy can relegate children's film and television to endless parochialism or being given the status of national heritage. The alternative, of losing the uniqueness of national children's cultures, seems inconceivable. The wider world of children's film and television would surely be the poorer without the rural mischief of Shaun the Sheep, let alone the dogged fortitude of Gromit and the sheer eccentricity of Wallace; anyone for a hot cup of tea?

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[1] See http://www.bfi.org.uk/supporting-uk-film/british-certification-tax-relief/cultural-test-childrens-television-programmes.
[2] See the IMDB entry for *The Secret of Kells*, https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0485601/.